MEMORANDUM

Children's Television Workshop

DATE: April 4, 1976

TO: Sesame Street Producers, Writers, Joyce Acey

CC:

FROM: Ana Herrera, Sesame Street Research

SUBJECT: MARGARET HAMILTON - THE WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST

This memo is to report the results obtained from testing the segments of show 847, with Margaret Hamilton. Testing took place during March 1 to March 5 at Grant Day Care Center. A total of 26 children were observed, including 14 who were tested for comprehension. The show was viewed in color by 10 children and in B/W by 16 children. The objective of the study was to assess children's reactions to the Wicked Witch of the West. We were particularly interested in knowing if these segments were unusually fear arousing.

RESULTS:

Attention - Since preschoolers are hesitant to admit that they are afraid, it was very difficult to evaluate these segments. The children were exceptionally attentive during the Margaret Hamilton segments. Whenever the witch appeared on the screen all conversation ceased, and the youngsters became completely motionless and attentive to the segment, in contrast to their talkative and lively behavior during the non-street material. All of the plot-line segments received approximately equal amounts of attention from the children. The segment which received the least attention was "The Witch Fools Them." Attention declined when Margaret Hamilton appeared as herself, although most children understood that "the little old lady" was the witch in disguise.

When we compared the scores of children viewing in color with the scores of those watching in B/W, we found that the color elicited slightly more attention that the B/W. The children were particularly interested in the green color of the witch's face.

Comprehension - The children were asked a series of questiong at the conclusion of each segment in which the witch appeared. Almost all of the children understood why the witch was angry at David during the first segment.

When the children were asked if Big Bird was afraid of the witch, more than half of them said "No." Some of the youngsters felt that Big Bird was there to protect the other cast members. However, when asked if the kids on the set were afraid, the responses were half negative and half affirmative. Since children identify more with the kids on the show than with other cast members, it was expected that this last question would be a key to their own feelings. But, the data obtained are not conclusive enough to be used in determining if the children were indeed afraid.

When the youngsters were asked questions on the departure of the witch, the answers they gave were in reverse order to those expected. When asked how David felt when the witch had left, almost half of the children replied "Sad." On the other hand, when asked the same question about Big Bird 10 of the 14 children thought that Big Bird was happy after the witch had left. The children's responses to the same question about their own feelings towards the witch's departure were also mostly "Happy."

Due to the responses obtained the data were difficult to interpret. Based upon the reverse responses which the children gave to the questions about the witch's departure, it seems evident that they had trouble selecting the appropriate emotional labels. Apparently, these children are only able to describe absolute emotions. To them happy means like and sad means dislike. They were, therefore, unable to comprehend that Big Bird was sad to see the witch go because he liked her and that David was happy to see her go because he disliked her. Due to the children's confusion, we were unable to determine how they really felt about the witch being on Sesame Street, although it seems that several children may have liked the witch.

LETTERS FROM PARENTS:

Although our data do not seem very conclusive some letters received from parents of preschoolers will help to interpret children's reactions to the show. Some remarks made by these parents seem crucial and should be taken into consideration when developing future segments. The following are some major points:

1- More emphasis should be place on the resolution than on the arousal of fear. The resolution in this case might have been to explain, somehow, that witches are not real. Many parents felt that if this show had to be aired, it should have been explained as "make-believe."

Some adults on the show (David, Maria) seemed to have accepted the witch as real. Children will also accept her as such since they accept all of the adults' claims as valid. Besides, if the children accepted David and Maria as real why shouldn't they accept the witch as real?

2- Some parents commented on their own trust and that of the children as having been broken. Many of their children have refused to watch Sesame Street again after having viewed show 847.

3- Parents felt that there was no need for a witch in order to teach "respect." Besides this, the children's fear prevented them from understanding the goal.

4- Many of these children had nightmares about the witch.

5- Some quotes from parents: "Terrible judgement.....you people- who are supposed to be authorities on child development." "The threat of the witch's power remains in children's eyes." "scream and tears..." from many children.

These letters received by parents should be taken into account since most Sesame Street viewers are at home in situations similar to those described in the letters. These children are usually alone or perhaps, with another young

child (usually a sibling). We must remember that when the child is in a Day Care Center he is accompanied by many other children and by many adults who he knows. During testing the child is also in the company of others (children and adults). Therefore, he will not be as easily frightened because he is not alone (this does not only happen with children; adults also feel less afraid when accompanied).

The segments on the Wicked Witch of the West have been the first to have received this large amount of mail (with negative comments); all within a very short period of time. This implies that parents felt an urgency to write as soon as possible due to their strong feelings against the street material in this show.

RECOMMENDATION:

Due to the parents' reactions, the contents of their letters, and our impressions from group observation data, we suggest that the Margaret Hamilton show not be re-run.

ADDENDUM:

The addendum includes comments made by the children during observations, their responses to our comprehension questions and a few of the letters sent by parents of some members of our target audience.

CHILDREN'S COMMENTS DURING OBSERVATION

Greeting: What a Wind
-Oh oh, the witch again..the witch is coming.
-Electricity, smokepot.
-What's it going to be in there? It's a broom! Sesame Street!! It's a witch, I know the witch is going to be there.

A Thirst Quencher
-There's the witch. It's raining. This was the only comment obtained during this segment. All other children watched raptly without making any comments.

Big Bird the Protector
-See the green witch...he is going to be afraid. That's Bob all dressed. He sounds like a girl...look she's green!
-Where's the witch?
-He should give her the broom. Oh, what he goit into...he will be turned into a little man.
-The witch is coming again.
-Big Bird there he go...get on your broom and fly away.
-Now the witch gonna be there. I don't like the witch...a witch! Don't do that!
-The witch gonna scare them. That's Big Bird! Watch her hands go like this (child demonstrated hand motions).

The Witch Fools Them
-Here comes the witch!
-Yeah, it's a witch
-Oh that bad witch again! Oscar will be scared, right? She's going to try some nasty things, right? He's stupid, he likes ugly mean things. She's playing a trick on them. Is Maria...she's gonna take it (broom). He's not gonna give it to her...she's being nice now. David doesn't see. She's gonna be nice. What king of witch is that...a wicked, wicked witch.
-It's Oscar.
-There go the witch again...(When the witch said: "I've got to get it back") you can't. The witch don't know who is Oscar.
-She got her broom again.
-He thinks that's the witch. That's the witch! How does he know? Now they don't have to go back.
-He going to get pretty. She's gonna be like the witch.
-Here's the witch now. Oh! He's scared. She'll turn back again.
-There it is. Who's that (referring to Oscar). The witch is gone. I'm getting a witch for Christmas and it's gonna scare somebody.
-Who that in the garbage can? Oscar! She got big teeth.
-Gonna take it. That's the witch!

The Witch Leaves
-She was going to be gone, but she's not, if she looses her broom again she can never go.
-He's gonna get the broom down again.
-Zoom, zoom! It's cold (during sounds of wind).
-There she is. It's gonna be raining again.
-Look at Big Bird's feathers.

Goodbye
-See how they fly! She's flying! Look at her flying. It's the witch!
-That's how her broom dropped! The witch dropped it. She's sloppy.
-Not again.
-Again the witch! Oh oh! (as broom fell).
-That's the witch.
-He gonna get the broom down again. He gonna cry now...I told you.
-Whooh! She flies up in the sky, Oh!
-Again?
-That's a witch. A witch up in the sky. That's a broom. Again.
-The witch flies? What's the witch doing? The witch left the broom.
-There she is. Who is that? The witch? There she goes.
-Oooh!

COMPREHENSION TESTING

Where did the witch come from?
-A house of witches.
-I don't know.
-From the house.
-The sky.
-Across the wall.
-The sky.
-Don't know.
-From the witch house.
-From a house.
-From the sky.
-From Sesame Street.
-From the sky.

Why was the witch angry at David?
-She wanted the broom back.
-He would't give her back her broom.
-The witch sneaked.
-Because the witch wanted her broom.
-He had her broom.
-Cause he want that broom.
-Because she didn't show...because she want her broom.
-Don't know.
-She wanted the broom back.
-Cause he had her broom.
-He had her broom.
-Because he took his broom.
-He wanted her to respect him a little bit.

Why didn't David want to give the broom back to the witch?
-Cause he didn't give it back to the witch.
-The witch said and he was mad.
-Because David said when the witch shows (forgot word 'respect').
-Just because he didn't want to.
-Because he didn't be quiet.
-The broom almost hit him in the head.

-Cause she wanna fly.
-She didn't show...
-Don't know.
-Because he wanted to sweep.
-Because she won't fly back in the air.
-Because it fell the wind blew it.
-He wanted her to respect him a little bit.

Did the witch scare David?
Yes - 5 children
No - 7 " "
-Yes, because she wanted her broom.
-No, he wasn't afraid of witches.
-No, she sounded like a man.
-No, she has those things around her (sparks)...she's gonna burn up.

Why did the witch make it rain in the store?
-The store was wet.
-Because she was mad atDavid because he had her broom.
-Because the witch laughed.
-Because she wanted to.
-They wanted water.
-Cause David said he want some water.
-She want her broom.
-She wanted to make some rain.
-Because he didn't give her broom.
-David's wife was thirsty.
-Because he's got the broom.
-Because he didn't give her the broom.

Did the witch scare Maria?
Yes - 5 children
No - 7 " "
IDK - 1 child
-No, because David was protecting her.
-No, she didn't know it was going to rain.
-I don't know, maybe.

Why does the witch laugh like that?
-Because she wanted to.
-Because David had her broom.
-Because the witch said, "gimme my broom."
-I don;t know, cause David said, "let's go outside, it's wet."
-Because they didn't want to give her her broom.
-Because she's wicked.
-It was raining in the store.
-Because she's a bad girl.
-She want back her broom.
-He has the broom.
-So she scare Maria.

Do you think the witch could really turn Big Bird into a feather duster?

Yes - 8 children
No - 5 " "
IDK - 1 child
-No, because that wasn't a real witch, her face looked like someone on Sesame Street.
-No, cause Big Bird had the white thing come on her (sparks)..she said she was gonna turn him into a basketball.
-No, because Big Bird can bite her.
-No, he's not for real, he's Bob dressed up.
-I think so.

Do you think Big Bird is afraid?

Yes - 5 children
No - 9 " "
-No, because he's a Big Bird, he protects people..he's a nicebird.
-No, he's too big.
-No, he's brave, he's not afraid of anything..if that was a real witch he'd be scared.
-No, cause he said, "I came to help you"...when the man said, "Go back to your nest" he said, "I came."

Do you think think the kids are afraid?

Yes - 7 children
No - 6 " "
-Yes, cause they was.
-No, because.
-Yes, the witch threatened David, she said she would turn him into a basketball.
-Yeah, cause the kids are little, but not me!..I'd give them a poison apple.
-No, they wasn't afraid, the witch came back, nobody was afraid.
-Yes, they are afraid...Big Bird's gonna turn into a duster.

What is that? (Researcher pointed to electrical sparks around witch's body).

-Paper shadows.
-Shock, it could kill you.
-Magic.
-That white thing came over her whole body, it hurt her.
-The electric.
-The witch.
-Electricity.

Who is that lady? (Researcher pointed to the witch as the little old lady).

-The witch.
-The witch.
-The witch...that's not the witch!
-That's the witch.
-A lady, I don't know her.
-The witch!
-A grandma.
-The witch.
-The lady that makes magic.
-A witch.
-The witch.
-It's a witch..grandma.
-The witch.

Why did the witch change herself into a nice lady?

-Nobody'll know who she is, she doesn't want to be a witch..she wants to hold the broom.
-Cause she took the broom away.
-Because the new lady was the witch, she wanted to hold the broom.
-She wanted to get the broom.
-So she could get her broom back.
-Cause she wanted the broom.
-Because she was going to turn David into a basketball.
-She wants her broom.
-She wanted her broom.
-She said to put the broom down..she said, "Aha! I got it." She wanted the broom back so she could fly. David wants her to calm down and apologize.
-They didn't know she was the witch.
-The witch could get away.
-David can't see us a witch to give her her broom back.

Why did David want her to be nice to him?

-Because the lady was the witch.
-Because the witch take the broom.
-Because he don't want the witch to come to the store.
-They didn't know she was the witch.
-I don't know.
-Because David had the broom.
-I don't know.
-Cause when the broom fell and almost broke his head off and she didn't apologize is she didn't, that's bad things, if she does.
-She beat him, she wanted her broom, she was calling him names.
-Because he didn't know that was the witch.
-For she could go away from Sesame Street.
-Because he was talking to someone else.
-Because she wants to fly back in the air.

Was David happy or sad that the witch was leaving?

Happy - 8 children
Sad - 5 " "
-Happy, she got her broom and fly away.
-He was sad like a girl.
-Happy, cause the witch went out.
-Happy cause the witch changed to a lady.

Was Big Bird happy or sad that the witch was leaving?

Happy - 10 children
Sad - 2 " "
IDK - 1 child
-Happy, she left for her world of witches.
-Yes, because Oscar liked things that were like him, green, like slimey.
-Happy, Big Bird wasn't afraid.

Are you happy or sad that the witch is leaving?

Happy - 10 children
Sad - 3 " "
Happy/Sad - 1 child
-Happy, no, sad. I like witches; I won't hurt the witch...I'd be nice to them! I like witches.
-Happy, she looks like a little rascal, Ernie looks like a rascal.
-Happy, cause I like witches.

Who does that broom belong to?

The witch - 13 children
-Sesame Street.

Why was David crying?

-Cause he was.
-Because David had the broom.
-Cause the witch threw the broom to him.
-It came back again.
-Because she didn't want the broom to move.
-It came back again.
-Because they didn't want the broom no more.
-He got the broom.
-He don't want to go throught it again.
-He didn't want the broom.
-The broom came back.
-Because he catched the broom again.
-Broom came again.

Do you think the witch will come back to Sesame Street?

Yes - 10 children
No - 4 " "
-Yes, because it fell again.
-Yes, to get her broom.
-Yes, to get the broom.
-No, she's gonna come back cause...